

The Failure of the Pullman Strike and Its Effect on the U.S. Labor Reform Movement

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In 1894, in Pullman, Illinois, the workers of the Pullman Palace Car Company went on strike.

This event, which began as an ordinary labor dispute, escalated into one of the most important and far-reaching events in United States labor history.

The Pullman Palace Car Company was founded in 1867 by George Pullman. By 1893, it was the foremost railroad car manufacturing company in the United States and employed 5,500 laborers. In 1880, George Pullman established the town of Pullman, just south of Chicago. Pullman was a company-owned town and Pullman workers were required to live there. Citizens were not allowed to own property. Rents for Pullman houses were twenty-five percent higher than rents in neighboring communities. Some houses were of poor quality. This lack of freedom began to create discontent among the people. In 1893, a financial panic hit the United States. Over 4,000 workers were initially laid off by Pullman and wages were drastically slashed. By April 1894, Pullman was able to rehire some men, bringing his total to 3,300. The wages, however, remained low, and rents were unchanged; that month, Pullman workers began to organize into local unions.

On May 7, 1894, a committee of Pullman workers presented their grievances to the company. Not only were their grievances dismissed, but three days later, three workers from that committee were laid off. That night, the Pullman workers voted to strike, and on May 11, Pullman was forced to close the plant. Over 3,000 workers joined the strike.

One year earlier, in June 1893, Eugene Debs had founded an organization called the American Railway Union (ARU). It attracted laborers who wanted more influence in workplace issues and by late 1893 could claim 150,000 members. Over the next year, the ARU became one of the strongest labor unions in the country.

In June 1894, the ARU joined forces with the Pullman strikers. This move gave national prominence to the Pullman grievances. It also put the commanding and popular presence of

Debs at the front of the Pullman struggle. Throughout June, the ARU attempted to arbitrate with Pullman managers. Time and again they were refused. On June 22, the ARU issued an ultimatum to the Pullman Palace Car Company: address the workers' grievances or a boycott of Pullman cars would begin on June 26. Pullman again turned away the arbitrators and on June 26, all members of the ARU across the country were instructed to stop handling Pullman cars. Because of the influence that the ARU had over railway workers, the union was able to halt the railway traffic in and around Chicago. The boycott expanded rapidly, as thousands of workers declined to run trains with Pullman cars attached. By June 28, more than 18,000 workers were participating in the boycott. Many of them were fired. The Pullman strike and boycott became a nationwide disruption.

Although state governments normally handled labor disputes, the federal government became involved in the railroad boycott of 1894 in late June, when workers refused to handle United States mail trains because Pullman cars were attached. The government was notoriously unsympathetic to labor unions and United States Attorney General Richard Olney responded to the halted mail traffic by issuing an injunction, called the Omnibus Indictment, on July 2, 1894. It forbade any striker or union representative to attempt to persuade another employee to abandon his job.

On July 1 and 2, strikers and supporters gathered peacefully in Chicago to continue to enforce the boycott. On July 2, the indictment was read to them and they were asked to disperse. The people refused and, in an unprecedented act, federal troops were sent to Chicago on July 3 to control the mobs, which, up until that point, had not rioted. Not only was this the first time the federal government had intervened in a labor issue, but it was also acting against the wishes of John Altgeld, the governor of Illinois, who strongly believed that state forces could handle the situation. Angered that the troops had been sent, the people began to riot. On July 5, seven buildings were burned; the following day, a mob of 6,000 set 700 railway cars on fire; and on July 7, another mob assaulted the state militia. The militia fired into the crowd, killing four and wounding twenty. On July 8 more federal troops were sent to control the violence and the mobs were ordered again to disperse. Finally, two days later, Eugene Debs was arrested and all the riots ended. The boycott was over and train traffic resumed. In total, thirteen people had been killed and 53 wounded. On August 2, 1894, the strikers returned to work.

The immediate consequences of the strike were insignificant. Pullman workers had to

return to their jobs, still hampered by high rents and low wages. The ARU had been defeated and its strength dwindled. Furthermore, the federal government had shown definitively its position towards labor unions and laborers. With the deployment of federal troops and the willingness to use lethal force, it became clear to the nation that the wealthy capitalist would be supported before the laborer.

The strike, however, had unexpected and enormous long-term consequences. It showed the American people the power they held in their hands. With their vast numerical superiority over the upper classes, laborers could join together and fight as a powerful force. Even if it had been for only a few weeks, the laborers had deeply disrupted the traffic of the nation with the boycott of the railroads. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the Pullman strike and resulting boycott awakened Americans to the labor problems affecting people all over the country. With the increased publicity of the Pullman workers' grievances, more Americans realized that there was a definite labor problem and that labor was long overdue to reform. The Pullman strike sparked an era of labor reform that changed the face of capitalist America forever.

[From History Matters, "Broken Spirits: Letters on the Pullman Strike," historymatters.gmu.edu (July 3, 2002); At Home in a House Divided, "U.S. Strike Commission: The Pullman Strike: Its Causes and Events," www.museum.state.il.us (Dec. 31, 1996); The Illinois Labor History Society, "Gene Debs and the American Railway Union," www.kentlaw.edu (July 3, 2002); Kansas University, "The Pullman Strike," www.ku.edu (Mar. 3, 1998); Almont Lindsey, Pullman Strike, the story of a Unique Experiment and of a Great Labor Upheaval; Lause's Links, "Eugene Victor Debs," www.geocities.com (July 3, 2002); Ohio State University, "Events of the Pullman Strike," w912.historyv.ohio-state.edu (July 3, 2002); Colston E. Wame, The Pullman Boycott of 1894.}